

In July 1969, there was formed in South Africa a black ("non-white") students organisation of African, Coloured and Indian students, called the South African Students' Organisation (SASO). It successfully held its annual congress in 1970, the congress attended by 100 representatives of 3,000 students. (Belville Coloured College did not attend.)

The 1970 congress of SASO adopted the following constitutional preamble:

" We, the black students of institutions of higher learning in South Africa, believing that black students in South Africa have unique problems and aspirations, that it is necessary for black students to consolidate their ranks if their aspirations are to be realised, that there is a crying need in South Africa for black students to re-assert their pride and group identity, therefore adopt this constitution in the belief that unity and positive re-awakening will result among the black students of South Africa. "

The congress also adopted a resolution on NUSAS some of whose clauses are:

" In accordance with its belief that the emancipation of the black people in this country depends entirely on the role the black peoples themselves are prepared to play; aware that in the principles and make up of NUSAS the black students can never find expression for the aspirations that are foremost in their minds; ... withdraws SASO's recognition of NUSAS as a true national union and instructs the Executive to continue the relevance of the organisation as to the black student community and to maintain such contact as is compatible with the aims of SASO. "

To appreciate the position of SASO in the striving of the oppressed peoples of South Africa for liberation, today, we should try to understand why and how SASO was formed.

In its documents SASO points out that from 1960, when the Fort Hare Transfer Act came into effect, Fort Hare students were cut off from other progressive students throughout the country. When the other 2 " university colleges came into being, they suffered the same fate.

The Rectors at these colleges banned NUSAS. Contact among the African students was for a while maintained through the African Students' Association (ASA), founded in 1961. After a while the ASA however died out. (There were also the African Students Union of S.A. and the Durban Students Union, both of which also died out.)

Then there came into being in 1967, the University Christian Movement (UCM) which broke away from the long-established students' religious organisation, the Students Christian Association. As SASO says of the UCM:

" The establishment of the UCM in 1967 opened new avenues for contact... with the getting together of students from the University Colleges, dialogue began among black students. "

As for the UCM; it came into existence " mainly as a reaction to the very narrow theological attitude of the SCA and to its being in fact ... an all-white and all-English-speaking body. " The UCM asked the question " what hope the Gospel contains for the disinherited blacks who sit with their backs to the wall rather than for the rich whites who sit with their bums in the butter. " Within the UCM, therefore, there is " an intense interest in ' black theology ' ... particularly among its black members. "

Enabled to meet together through the UCM, the black students began to discuss issues of concern to them.

" One of the most talked-about topics was the position of the black students in the " open organisations " like NUSAS and UCM. ... It was felt that a time had come when blacks had to formulate their own thinking unpolluted by ideas emanating from a group with lots at stake in the status quo. "

Black students nevertheless attended the 1968 NUSAS Congress. " The overriding impression was that the blacks were there in name only. The

swing to the right in (NUSAS) did not meet with the usual counter from the blacks. It was clear that none of the blacks felt a part of the organisation. Hence the Executive that was elected was all white. "

Shortly afterwards the black delegates at the UCM conference demanded time to meet alone as a group. Here they formally discussed for the first time the idea of forming a black organisation.

The complexity of the question whether to establish a black organisation or not and the serious attitude taken by the students is shown by the communique which SASO issued after its 1969 inaugural conference. To quote:

" At a time when events are moving so fast in the country, it is not totally advisable to show any division amongst student ranks - especially now that students appear to be a power to be reckoned with in this country. In a racially sensitive country like ours, provision for racially exclusive bodies tends to build up resentment and to widen the gap that exists between the races, and the student/s community should resist all attempts to fall into this temptation. "

Nevertheless the decision to form SASO was taken.~~and~~ The communique continues: " In choosing to meet on a limited scale rather than not meeting at all, the non-white students shall be choosing the lesser evil, and striving to offset some of the evils that have accrued from the same system that made it impossible for them to meet freely with other students. "

In all there were " eight black campuses " represented at the 1970 SASO congress, including not only the ' universities ' but also theological seminaries and teacher-training colleges. " Interested persons from Wits, UCT and UNISA " also participated.

Apart from the 1970 resolutions already quoted, the congress adopted stands on other issues.

It instructed the Executive " to concentrate on attempts at revival of various aspects of black culture in the belief that a people's culture is their natural rallying point. "

It passed resolutions dealing with " deficiencies experienced by black students in the type of education drawn up for them. " ~~The~~

" The black press came under attack for its contribution to the moral degeneration of the black people by its insistence on printing cheap articles. " It was felt that " more space and depth should be given to problems affecting the black community. "

" Specific plans were also laid out by the commission on Field Work defining the role the black students can play in trying to alleviate the appalling conditions under which the black people are living. While this was felt to be mostly of token value, its psychological effect on the black people can be tremendous. "

The 1970 SASO Congress documents also report that: " The symposium on " Black is beautiful ' was more than just a symposium. It was a search into the souls of the black masses, both student and non-student, for the rare characteristic - the determination to take up the cudgels in accordance with one's beliefs. "

The following statements from leaders of SASO help us further to understand the thinking within the organisation.

In July 1970, Barney Pitso, president of SASO stated: " Blacks are tired of standing on the sidelines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and by themselves. "

Charles Sibisi, international relations officer, stated a few months later that " it does not help us to see several quiet black faces in a multi-racial student gathering which concentrates on what white students believe are the needs of black students. " Sibisi continued to say that SASO would nevertheless maintain " open contact " with white students.

The work that SASO actually undertakes can be divided into 1. Field work, 2. Leadership courses and 3. Education.

On Field work: " Firstly, we want to be in a position to get really involved with the community in the reserves by way of work camps over the long vacations. The sites of the work camp will probably be the resettlement

areas initially, where we intend with the help of the local community, to build schools. This can be done fairly well with the cooperation of the various local authorities and we have already received promises from highly-placed people that this cooperation is forthcoming. The second form would require much less money but more involvement and initiative. This is sending teams of students also to the reserves, to act as health visitors literacy trainers, agricultural demonstrators, advisers in family planning etc. Again we have been promised by a prominent leader of one of the large Bantustans that cooperation from his group is guaranteed. " Already the black students are running one clinic open one day in the week and it handles 150 patients a week. They want also to start mobile clinics.

On Leadership courses: " The leadership courses we provide are run at regional and national level. At a time when no meaningful political opinion is being expressed by the black world in South Africa, it is ~~xxx~~ absolutely essential for us to consistently expand the circles of those students who we regard as potentially useful. This is done via these courses. Since we are involved in community work we have to constantly examine ways and means of approaching our people and politicising them as we work with them. Hence the need for us to be extremely clear on what we are talking about. It is for this reason that we regard these leadership courses as being the cornerstone of our programme..!! (The courses) are run under some sort of camouflage. There are four regional meetings each twice a year and one national one once a year. "

On Education: " (It is) necessary for us to purchase some books that are necessary in the fields of history, politics, philosophy, etc. In addition a number of good books on current thinking and ideologies are not available in the libraries and we intend getting quite a lot of these for the black campuses. " Further " we believe that it is our right and duty as representatives of black students to control " bursary funds " so as to have a sufficient number of people trained in various fields so as to be useful at a later stage. "

Before we discuss this programme of activities, we should return to the question of the UCM.

The close contact between SASO and the UCM continues. This is undoubtedly assisted by the fact that not only has the latter become a predominantly black organisation in its membership (the black/white ratio being 3:1), but also blacks have come into its leadership, the current president being Chris Mokoditso. As to thinking within the UCM, this statement made in March 1970 by Mokoditso is worthy of close attention:

" So often in the past, the white students have shown a concern only for things in the academic world - the Mafeje issue, for example, was more academic than social...

Among non-white students the question becomes whether the authoritarian, repressive measures of governing bodies and fear of student informers will force them into their shells. It is an uncomfortable fact that the intensity of oppressive response varies directly in proportion to the darkness of the skin pigmentation of the protestor. This places a further inhibiting factor on non-white protest, for protest can and does jeopardise careers and even freedom. Can we expect noble suicide to continue among non-white students? And suicide it must be until the student lead is backed by open, mass support. And that is unlikely to be forthcoming while non-white, like white, student protest focusses publicly on what are essentially academic and university administration affairs.

So what we can expect is continued, sporadic and not very consequential protest (in terms of social change) to continue among students. We have to wait for the man with the message and the means to mobilise the resources for change into effective action. Until then, man cannot live on bread alone, nor can students live on visions stagnating in inactivity. For their own sanity they must do something, even though they have no illusions of ~~xxx~~ grandeur about what they do. "

Other documents issued by the UCM state that: " Contrary to the views of the major legal political parties in South Africa, the basic problem in this country is not racism. The problem lies further back even than the inequalities of power; political, military, economic and educational. " The basic problem is one of land and " land equality and power equality are but facets of each other ..."

Further, the UCM believes that " constitutional means of change via the ballot box are a pipe dream... Even the Progressive Party is prepared to make inroads into racial distinctions and separations so long as there is to be no fundamental change on the land question. "

Having rejected " inter-racial contact and communication " as " stimulating " but " not much use in the struggle between the land-rich and the disinherited ", the UCM argues for the necessity of a " power confrontation, which will inevitably bring conflict and suffering, and cannot guarantee reconciliation on the other side of the death of the alienating old. But this is the risk that has to be taken ..."

But for the confrontation to take place what is necessary is " the development of what might ^{best} be described as 'black consciousness', through the formation of organisations " free from the inhibiting factor of whites ... Perhaps above all they will here need to re-learn the history of black Africa, and hear its news through blacks." Secondly, there has to be literacy campaigns as " illiterates are bound to be cut off from the movement towards black liberation. " Thirdly, there is a need for " an attack on the utterly dehumanising poverty situation, particularly in the rural areas... If the black intellectuals and elite could be made to see the political importance of the rural areas, and would spend some of their energies in assisting rural development, they would be playing a vital role. "

The UCM continues: " If the campaign to spread black consciousness continues to catch fire and spread as it is doing at the present, and moves into the areas of attacking illiteracy and poverty carrying with it the ideals, values and goals of black dignity which will not stop short of black independence, it will provide, hopefully, the foundation of black unity or solidarity on which can be built the economic campaigns aimed at wresting power from the whites, ~~and~~ which means wresting their land control from them. "

The UCM now sees its role in the race issue to be " one of radicalising the few white members it still has, and to enable more and more black students to get rid of the multi-racial complex of its liberal white members in order to see the real issue of land injustice and the power struggle it involves, and to encourage them to move into black organisations working at strategies to enable the confrontation of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' ".

We felt it necessary to give this detailed information about SASO and the UCM in order to enable the groups to conduct meaningful discussions about these new developments, which discussions, it is hoped, will assist the Party not only better to understand the mood among significant sections of the oppressed, but would also contribute to its being better able to influence these sections and help bring them within the mainstream of the revolutionary forces in South Africa.

Given even that the information at hand, on these organisations, is not complete or entirely comprehensive, we would suggest that we should view these developments with critical sympathy. They are characterised in the main by certain positive features, but may also carry some negative ones, which, in the future, could hamper the development of a consistently revolutionary outlook and practice.

Notable is the fact that as the Vorster regime increases its repression, so does black anti-racist nationalism gain in strength. (It is not only SASO that chose to call itself black rather than non-white. In the Johannesburg Urban Bantu Council has also been the expressed the desire that it should be called the Urban Black Council. The Durban "Leader" reports the same feeling from a survey it conducted. Even the Rev. Beyers Naude has pointed out that the Christian Institute has experienced a withdrawal of blacks and black organisations - a growing sense of Black Power was, he said, an inevitable outcome of the racial policies, legislation and attitudes of whites.)

It is of course also of interest that the SASO programme, in the end, appears to be oriented towards social-welfare programmes, in spite of the militant political stances adopted. We should however bear in mind that the

organisation is working legally. South Africa is still suffering under a regime of extreme reaction. The students have for a long time not only had little contact among themselves, but they have also, as an organised group, had little contact with the masses of the working people. Furthermore, the present generation of students has also had little contact on a mass scale with the revolutionary movement.

In these circumstances, they are seeking ways in which they can be with the people, "politicising" them, in this relying on the own knowledge of the situation and ingenuity. They may in fact be showing ways in which while developing the very necessary illegal methods of struggle, we should also pay close attention to using every opportunity legally to make contact with the people.

We would of course see as a restricted view that the land question is the main problem in South Africa (with the corollary thesis that the peasants are the most revolutionary force?), this as expressed theoretically by the UCM and practically by SASO in its programme for Field work. Without arguing it out, we may say that such a view would have the effect of cutting off the rural from the urban working masses, handing over the vanguard role to the former, and ignoring the socio-economic realities of South Africa which point to the predominance of monopoly capital over all other property relations.

This reawakening however serves as confirmation of the correctness of the unwavering faith in the unwillingness of the people to submit to oppression that the Party and the national liberation movement have maintained even during the most difficult periods.

It will undoubtedly fall on this revolutionary movement as a whole to help in the militant resurgence of the people, correctly to guide the people in their understanding and practice, while learning from the experience of the people themselves, and to lead them to the victory which will ensure the dignity and national identity of the black and all the peoples of South Africa.